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ABSTRACT

The standards-driven approach to school reform, exemplified by Goals 2000, shows promise for unifying contemporary efforts by affecting change at the classroom, school, and community levels. The special aspects of the rural context, particularly distance and low population density, set it apart from the urban and suburban schools on which most reform research has been done. To develop reform strategies applicable to rural schools, the literature is reviewed in three related lines of inquiry: developing professional practice among teachers; enhancing organizational conditions for systemic change; and supporting collaboration/consortia-building. Four types of cooperative linkages are defined: networking, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. These form a series of continua in relation to formality, definition of goals, time commitment, autonomous control, responsibilities, and concerted effort. Three major studies are reviewed to delineate the factors that contribute to successful collaboration. To enable rural students to achieve high standards, rural schools must begin to develop whole strategies that will result in fundamental changes in curriculum, instruction, and student assessment. Professional practice, positive organizational conditions for change, and rural consortia building are necessary elements of a potentially viable rural change approach. Contains 30 references. (RAH)

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Building Professional Practice Consortia: Strategies for Systemic Reform in Rural Schools

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November, 1994

Building Professional Practice Consortia: Strategies for Rural Systemic Reform

Systemic Reform at the National Level

As long as public education has existed, there have been movements afoot to reform it. In the recent past, reform has focused on changing various elements of the education system. These reform efforts have run the gamut from relatively minor changes such as introduction of a new science text to major innovations such as individualized instruction, open education and team teaching, among others. At times, educational reform has taken an approach that can best be characterized as an intensification of extant practices (for example: lengthening the school day/year, increasing graduation requirements).

Past reform efforts have originated from three broad perspectives on the need for educational change, perspectives that can be plotted on a continuum from micro- to macrocosmic: the classroom, characterized by efforts to reform professional practice; the school, marked by efforts to restructure educational institutions; and the community and beyond, represented by consortia-building and collaboration between groups and agencies in the educational arena, but also in the wider public and private sector.

On occasion, these perspectives on school reform intersect, but for the most part the domains run on parallel tracks that do not automatically synthesize into a concerted, broad-based plan for change. The fact that the classroom, school and public tracks have the potential to work also at cross-purposes may be one explanation for the

cyclical call for reform in public schooling. For example, the restructuring reformists at the school level may not confer with those who wish to enhance professional practice at the classroom level, who may in turn only confer on a cursory basis with colleagues and community members from outside their sphere of influence.

Contemporary school reform is taking a standards-driven approach that shows promise of unifying change efforts by affecting change at the classroom, school and community level. Standards have the potential to provide a common purpose for educational reform, a touchstone to measure success, and an impetus to talk across domains to achieve a broad-based, coordinated plan for successful school change.

The call for standards-driven reform is exemplified in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994. Goals 2000 calls for reforming the fundamental tenets of schooling. Rooted in the eight national educational goals which give it purpose and direction, the act is portrayed as the framework legislation for all federal legislation (including the massive ESEA legislation and the School to Work legislation). It calls for:

- High standards of performance for all students;
- Challenging curriculum which stresses complex cognitive outcomes;
- Authentic assessments which are linked to the curriculum and to the real lives of students;
- Preparation for and transition of students to the world of work;
- Involvement and participation by parents and the community;
- A comprehensive system of professional development.

Not only do these components of Goals 2000 have to work in concert to achieve national goals, reform also has to be coordinated across different layers of the educational system. That is, schools need to implement reform efforts which are aligned with district plans, which are in turn aligned with state-wide plans. Title III of the Goals 2000 legislation calls for the broad-based development and implementation of local Improvement Plans as well as a coordinated State Improvement Plan; the two planning efforts must address the core elements of systemic reform in complementary ways.

Standards-driven reform at the federal and state level will support change at the local level by encouraging the parallel tracks of educational reform to work in tandem to achieve lasting, effective and sweeping educational change.

Need for Developing Rural Strategies for Systemic Reform

Stands-driven reform sets in motion a process that supports reform for all schools. Even so, school reform efforts at the local level are of special concern to rural schools. Research demonstrates that we need to consider special aspects of the rural context when planning reformation of schools that are outside urban or suburban areas. A review of the literature also points to a need to continue to track and define the characteristics of rural schools and communities that set them apart from their urban counterparts.

How schools change and implement improvements has been the subject of research for over three decades. Much of that research has been done in urban and

suburban schools. For example, the effective schools literature (Purkey and Smith 1983; MacKenzie 1983; Cuban 1984) consists of research on characteristics associated with effective schools, most of which are elementary schools in urban systems. The educational change agent research, although derived from the agricultural change agent model, is for the most part a body of knowledge derived from studies of urban schools (Louis and Rosenblum 1981; Crandall and Loucks 1983). The literature reveals that the social, political, economic context of the community is so important in school improvement that what works in urban schools may not necessarily work in rural schools. On the other hand, there are valuable lessons to be learned from that urban body of knowledge: lessons which are applicable in some measure to the rural community. What is needed in rural educational research is a knowledge base of school improvement strategies that take into account the strengths and shortcomings of the rural context for change.

In developing that knowledge base of rural school renewal, we should caution against building a single or "one-best" model of change. In many ways, rural schools are as different among themselves as they are from their urban counterparts (Stern 1994). Instead of attempting to create a one-size-fits-all rural change model, we need to develop and test different change strategies that are effective within different rural settings. This paper attempts to outline change strategies that are applicable in the rural context and is intended to contribute to the knowledge base on rural school change.

The common and defining attributes of rural schools have to do with distance and population sparsity. Other social and economic conditions are the consequences of distance and population sparsity. Singly or in combination these attributes diminish rural capacity to provide a high quality education for all children and constrain rural ability to respond to reform mandates. For example, because rural communities are sparsely populated, it is difficult to generate adequate tax revenue for schools and other social services. With two residents per square mile, Nevada is a case in point. The fact that the federal government owns large swaths of land which are exempt from state and local taxes in Nevada further erodes the ability of local communities in that state to raise revenue. Despite equalizing funding formulae, low average daily attendance in rural schools generally means lower state support for schools. In addition, the low incidence of students who need special services present additional problems for rural schools who have the obligation under federal and state laws, but not the means and expertise, to comply with mandates to provide appropriate services.

Rural isolation can slow the rate of change to a near halt. Because of distance and small numbers, rural teachers and administrators often feel isolated from resources and ideas and from communities of professionals. In a rural school, it is not uncommon to find only one K-2 teacher or high school science teacher. The nearest colleague may be a hundred miles away. More than their urban counterparts, rural teachers need to gain better access to external resources and they need to be better connected with one another for assistance.

To effect systemic reform in rural schools, it is imperative both to acknowledge the hardships and build on the strengths of local context. Enhancing local capacity for change rather than importing it from the outside is more likely to have lasting effects. Strengthening teachers' roles in reform by engaging them in the discourse and practice of teaching builds local change capacity. And enabling rural schools and communities to band together to pool their resources and reach out to external sources of support is a practice consistent with the rural tradition of overcoming the limits of scarcity.

To help us develop strategies for systemic reform of rural schools, we turn to the literature in three related lines of inquiry: developing professional practice among teachers; enhancing organizational conditions for systemic change; and supporting collaboration/consortia-building.

Developing Professional Practice: Reform in the Classroom

At the core of the current conception of reform is the belief that schools must set standards of student performance; furthermore these standards must be set uniformly high across school systems in the country. However, setting high standards alone is not enough. Students must be challenged to perform to these high standards and teachers must be able to acquire a new repertoire of instructional strategies which challenge all students to perform at these levels. Teachers need to learn to teach a more demanding and integrated curriculum which has real-life meaning for students; they need to able to use technology, relate assessment to instruction, and attend to growing diversity in students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, and

special needs. It is readily apparent that a tremendous investment in teacher staff development is required to make standard-based reform work.

It is a daunting task, yet nothing substantive and enduring will occur in school reform if teachers do not make fundamental changes in the way they approach teaching. To make these enduring changes, staff development must offer teachers the chance to develop new knowledge, skills, and instructional strategies, and it must provide sustained support for ongoing fluency with the discourse and practice of newly acquired knowledge and skills. What is needed is a new professional efficacy associated with improvement in teacher status, knowledge, and participation in school improvement (Maeroff 1988). The literature consistently refers to several necessary ingredients in attaining professional efficacy: teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices (Shulman 1988; Schon 1987; Little 1982); they need to engage in that reflection with other professionals to develop a sense of collegiality and a norm of continuous improvement (Little 1981; Rosenholtz 1989).

Lieberman and Miller (1990) have suggested that teachers' professional practice needs to include the following five characteristics:

1. **Colleagueship, openness, and trust.** Teachers exhibit shared ownership of issues, a willingness to consider alternative explanations for practices, and a desire to work together as colleagues.
2. **Opportunity and time for disciplined inquiry.** Teachers engage in inquiries about teaching and learning as part of their role. The criteria by which these inquiries should be judged are: the importance of the

questions, the legitimacy of the sources of data, and the usefulness of the results to teaching and learning.

3. **Teacher learning of content in context.** Teaching is woven into the same cloth as learning; they are interdependent. Teaching has to do with the facilitation of the production of knowledge; curriculum is not given but constructed empirically and based on the needs and interests of the learners.

4. **Reconstruction of leadership roles.** A transition is made from technical and management leadership to cultural leadership; a corresponding move is made from centralized to alternative decentralized leadership.

5. **Networks, collaborations, and coalitions.** Support is developed outside the school in order to encourage experimentation and to provide information and psychological support.

These elements of professional practice are reflected in the underlying principles of such groups as Coalition of Essential Schools, Foxfire, and Accelerated Schools. In all these reform programs, an essential ingredient is a tightly knit network or coalition of teachers who are engaged in professional discourse and reflection about teaching, who support one another in disciplined inquiry, who take on leadership roles in the school system, and who are open to new ideas. Developing a sense of professional practice requires changes in teacher roles and relations to each other, to

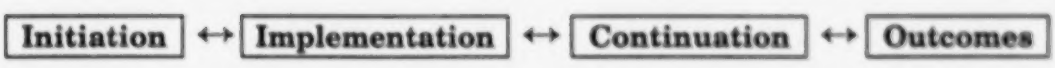
administrators, parents and students (Huberman and Miller 1984). These changes in professional roles and relations are both difficult and essential for sustaining school reform.

Developing Professional Organizations: Changing Schools

Research on school improvement (Louis and Rosenblum 1981, Kagan, Rivera, and Parker 1991; Fullan 1991; Huberman and Miles 1984; Crandall et. al 1982; Berman and McLaughlin 1978) suggests that planned educational change undergoes several developmental stages which have been broadly labeled as: *initiation*, *implementation*, and *continuation* (also known as institutionalization). Initiation is the planning process that leads up to and includes a decision to make a change. It includes developing a shared vision, outlining an action plan, and finding the appropriate resources. Implementation involves putting the ideas into practice; for example, purchasing the materials, arranging and conducting the staff development activities, monitoring for feedback on how the ideas are working. If the change is successful through the continuation phase, it gets built in as an ongoing part of the system rather than disappearing by way of decision to discard or through attrition. These stages result in the attainment of outcomes. Fullan (1991) provides an overview of the change process as follows.

Figure 1

Overview of Change Process



This organizational change process, from initiation, to implementation, to continuation is a much simplified view of the change process. The two-way arrows imply that it is not a linear process. The time required for a change process to complete its course is usually a matter of several years, even for moderately complex changes. For major restructuring efforts such as standards-driven reform, it may take five to ten years (Fullan 1991). At each stage of the change process, there are organizational factors which influence how change progresses. Fullan (1991) and others describe a number of these organizational factors.

- School improvement is technically simple, but socially complex. Research on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), for example, demonstrates that change is a highly personal experience, made by individuals first, then organizations (Hall and Loucks 1978). Individuals in organizations have levels of concerns as they learn about, prepare for, use, and refine new practices. These levels of concern generally flow from a focus on self to task to impact, and they are manifested in corresponding behavioral indices of levels of use of the innovation.

- At the initiation stage, change can get started with small active groups of people who have the inclination to learn by doing, who get the process underway and build momentum (Fullan 1991; Louis and Miles 1990).

- Changes in teacher roles and relations to each other, to administrators, parents and students are the most difficult to accomplish. However, such changes are essential if school reform that is more than superficial is to be sustained (Huberman and Miles, 1984).

- Individual and organizational readiness to change, the relevance of the innovation to concerns of stakeholders, and the availability of resources are essential elements to the initiation of planned change. Fullen (1991) labeled them the 3Rs of change: readiness, relevance and resources.

- The presence of an external change agent to link the school system to outside ideas and resources as well as an internal advocate to harness local support are essential ingredients to successful change efforts (Louis and Rosenblum 1981; Berman and McLaughlin 1978; Horsley, et al. 1991).

- The relationship between changes in behavior and beliefs (or understanding) is reciprocal and ongoing, with change in ways of doing or behaving a necessary experience on the way to breakthroughs in meaning and understanding (Fullan 1991). In other words, doing may precede believing and understanding.

- School improvements often fail because insufficient time and attention were devoted to implementation issues (Horsley et.al. 1991; Crandall and Loucks

1983). Pre-planning implementation is not enough. It is the ongoing, interactive, cumulative learning during implementation that is critical to the success of an improvement effort.

- Staff development is a central theme of change. But staff development needs to be used more intensively during the implementation of new ideas than in the initial phase. "No matter how much advance staff development occurs, it is when people actually try to implement new approaches and reforms that they have the most specific concerns and doubts. [Training approaches] are effective when they combine concrete, teacher-specific training activities, ongoing continuous assistance and support during the process of implementation" (Fullan 1991, pp. 85-86).

- Successful implementation consists of some transformation or continual development of initial ideas. That is, the change which is implemented successfully is often not the same as the one initially conceived (Fullan, 1991; Berman and McLaughlin 1978).

- Both pressure and support for change are necessary. They are the impetus for initiating change (Fullan 1991).

- For a successful planned change to continue, availability of support and incorporation of the change into policy or guidelines need to be provided. Furthermore, briefing and training for new staff need to occur to maintain the momentum of change (Fullan 1991).

These are not all the possible factors affecting the success of an innovation. They are culled from the change literature to illustrate the point that standards-driven reform requires fundamental changes in both individual teacher behavior (as in professional practice) as well as changes in the way school organizations function to support change. Furthermore, standards-driven reform requires managing both the change *content* (i.e., the substantive elements of the change) and the change *process*, while simultaneously attending to their complex interrelationships. As Fullan (1991) conclude, "change is not a fully predictable process. The answer is found not by seeking ready-made guidelines, but by struggling to understand and modify events and processes that are intrinsically complicated, difficult to pin down, and ever changing"(Fullan 1991, p. 107-108.) Implementing change is "a science of muddling through".

Developing Professional Collaboratives: Community-wide Reform

Working together is often the only recourse for resource-poor rural schools. By virtue of small size, rural schools have traditionally banded together to share provision of services such as purchasing, transportation, and special education. This rural

tradition can successfully be extended to the area of developing professional collaborations/coalitions. How do rural schools encourage the development of professional collaboratives? What are the ingredients of successful collaboratives? And how can collaboratives of educators reach out to parents, business people and community expertise to get support for reform?

Collaboration is not easily effected. It is often confused with other less demanding forms of interpersonal linkages such as networking coordination; furthermore, the investment of time and energy needed to form successful collaboratives is often under-estimated. Lourgren (1991) identifies four types of collaborative linkages: networking, coordination, cooperation and collaboration. Lourgren suggests that these types of collaborative linkages operate in increasing formalization, required time commitment, and concerting of energy towards common goals. *Networking*, on one end of the continuum, is *ad hoc*, informal, and lacks purposiveness (other than a generalized purpose to "stay in touch"). *Coordination* requires more structure and time; however, participants retain control over their work; they may only be required to inform others about their activities in order to avoid duplication of effort or disruptions in work flow. *Cooperation* demands more concerted efforts toward a goal; it requires leaders who specify the nature of cooperation among participants. Finally, on the other end of the continuum, successful collaboration requires a more formalized structure which delineates the responsibilities (and the potential benefits) of the collaborators, an extended time commitment, and clearly defined common goals and objectives.

Other researchers (Hord 1986; Benard 1989) emphasize the notion that successful collaborations, unlike other forms of linkages, require the sharing of power or control for the good of the collaborative. Leadership roles are shared; participants learn that they must compromise in order to accomplish the common purpose. Furthermore, collaboration requires that participants closely monitor the course of the collaborative and take corrective actions when difficulties occur. Conflict and disillusion occur when participants underestimate the demands of successful collaborations or are not clear about which of these interpersonal linkages (networking, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration) is the intended goal.

Hord (1986) drew further distinctions between cooperation and collaboration. She suggests that collaboration requires agreement on projected results, outcomes, products or services; delineation of communication channels and levels across collaborating agencies; and a distributed leadership structure.

Nachtigal (1991) studied "clusters" of rural schools. A "cluster" is "a number of school districts working together for the benefit of all." If differs from the intermediate service agencies like BOCEs in that clusters involve fewer schools and generally implement procedures that directly affect students as opposed to school operations *per se*. He found that informal clusters of a few schools who are in close proximity to one another, who have a common purpose, and who devote time and energy to work together and share resources are likely to be successful in making real improvements.

Repeatedly, researchers have showed that successful collaborations require clear and mutual goals, time commitment, energy, broad-based representation, shared

decision-making, and resources. Table 1 summarizes the ingredients of successful collaboration identified by several researchers in the field of community services (Benard 1989), school improvement (Hord 1986) and rural schools research (Nachtigal 1991).

In the final analysis, collaboration is a human process, requiring first and foremost attention to human issues. There is no prescribed formula for achieving successful collaboration. "You can try to create an infrastructure, but the bottom line is people-to-people." (Clements 1989). Clements' work with building community teams demonstrated that the real issue is not creating a team merely to accomplish a specific goal but "to create a critical mass of leaders within communities who can be a support network for each other as they work on a variety of different issues they have interest in." (Clements 1989, p2). Building up that critical mass of people to a majority in the school system is the way to "scaling up" systemic change from a few isolated cases of successful schools (Olson 1994).

TABLE 1

Factors Contributing to Successful Collaboration

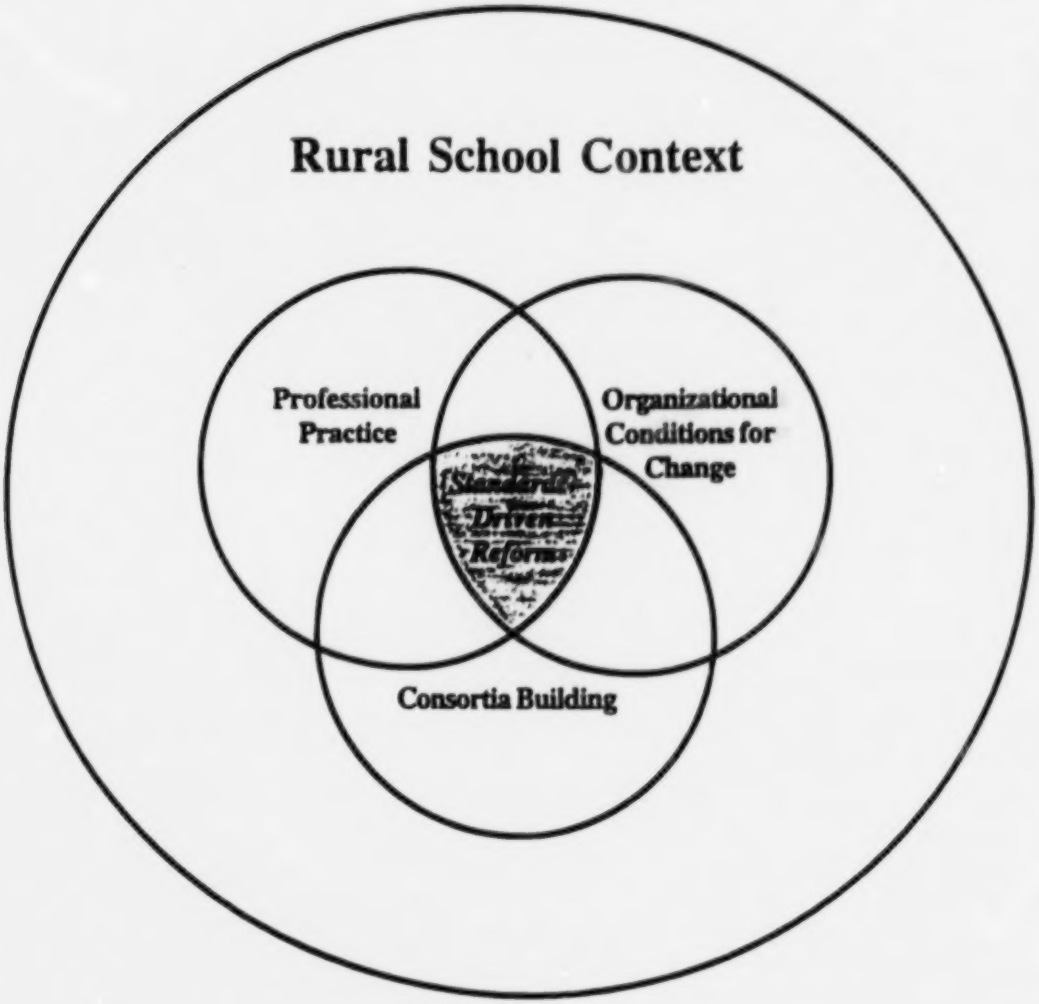
Hord (1986)	Bernard (1989)	Nachtigal (1991)
1. Needs and interests.	1. Mutual need and interest.	1. Organize around a common purpose.
2. Time.	2. Time.	2. Participation requires a time commitment.
3. Energy.	3. Energy.	3. Member schools should be similar (in size).
4. Communication.	4. Resources.	4. Geographic proximity may be necessary.
5. Resources	5. Communication.	5. Keep the organizational structure simple (and informal).
6. Organizational factors.	6. Leadership/institutional support.	6. Active participation of school leaders is essential.
7. Control.	7. Broad based representation.	7. Early involvement of school board.
8. Perceptions.	8. Clear and mutual goals.	8. Support organizations can play a role.
9. Leadership.	9. Attention to group process.	9. Start small and build on success.
10. Personal traits.	10. Mutual respect.	10. Frequent meetings are required initially.
	11. Equality among participants.	11. Shared financing can result in substantial programs.
	12. Equality among partners.	12. Clusters must be accountable for their activities.
	13. Shared ownership.	
	14. Commitment	
	15. Rewards.	
	16. Personal characteristics.	

Towards Developing Professional Practice Consortia in Rural Schools

Achieving high standards for all students is at the core of the current school reform movement. But setting high standards alone is not enough. To enable rural students to achieve these high standards of performance, rural schools must begin to develop whole strategies which will result in fundamental changes in curriculum, instruction, and student assessment. The literature on professional practice, educational change, and developing collaborations or consortia suggests that the overlap of these lines of inquiry implies a viable change strategy for rural standards-driven reform. Figure 2 depicts the relationship among the three elements and reform.

Figure 2

**Building Professional Practice Consortia:
Strategies for Rural Systemic Reform**



The inclusion of the first circle indicates that a norm of Professional Practice for teachers is essential if change is to endure. A sense of professional efficacy includes collegiality and openness among peers, engaging in disciplined inquiry about teaching and learning, facilitating the construction of knowledge, assuming new leadership roles, and building professional networks.

In the rural context, conditions are ripe for building collaborative teacher networks. Rural teachers often assume multiple roles in the school system, and by necessity they often develop informal networks of colleagues outside their immediate school environment. Often the colleagues are in another rural county or at the nearest urban school system, college or county office. Collaborations and the sharing of ideas are very much a rural tradition, if not an absolute necessity.

What makes efforts to enhance professional practice difficult is the distance that separates professional colleagues. Traditional professional staff development opportunities such as workshops and conferences are often conducted in metropolitan areas some distance away, making it difficult and costly for most staff to attend. In some rural communities when teachers decide that it is cost-effective to be away from the classroom for several days at a time, they may not be able to leave because of lack of substitutes. Additional means must be made available for teachers to have the time and the opportunity to convene in order to reflect on practice, engage in disciplined inquiry, and learn new instructional content as well as strategies. The alternatives include: bringing staff development opportunities to a centrally-located rural hub and

using various forms of technology (fax, electronic bulletin boards, teleconference, electronic databases).

Just as standards-driven education is not the end-all of reform, developing teachers' professional practice alone is not enough. Teachers operate in an organizational environment which has equal potential to support or inhibit teacher growth. The principal, as well as the district office, have critical roles to play in enhancing organizational conditions for change. The second circle in Figure 2 represents the host of organizational conditions in the school system which facilitate or retard change.

For change to be initiated and sustained at the rural school, there must be sufficient organizational press for change; consensus on the change object and change outcomes; resources to plan the change; an internal advocate to champion it, and an external agent (community, technical assistance agency, county office) to legitimize it and/or provide resources to support it. These organizational conditions must be present to support the teacher leaders and/or principal and to bring along the rest of the faculty and staff.

The third circle in Figure 2, Consortia Building, encompasses the area of networking with other rural schools systems as well as with other service providers in the community. Again, rural schools are generally more receptive to forming collaborative relationships, perhaps motivated by a general paucity of resources--ironically the same factors which make rural collaborations difficult to maintain. Threats to successful collaborations are many. In the rural areas, local pride and

autonomy often intervene and mitigate the success of rural collaborations, particularly if benefits are perceived to be distributed unevenly or are not readily forthcoming. However, building collaborations/consortia extends the resource and knowledge base of individual rural entities, enables more efficient use of resources, and provides perhaps the only avenue for small rural schools to even begin to tackle the massive problems associated with a sweeping effort such as standards-driven reform.

Professional practice, positive organizational conditions for change, and rural consortia building are necessary elements of a potentially viable rural change approach. Future development is needed to test the approach in different rural contexts in order to build a knowledge base which is particularized to rural school reform.

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